

Introduction to Focus: Top 40 Bad Books

Richard Ford once said that it takes as much effort to produce a bad book as a good book.

And as disheartening as that sounds, what Ford's assertion might raise, and what most everyone who has attempted the task of a book-length work already knows, is the notion that effort alone does not ensure a book's success, and that there are probably more ways for a good book to be overlooked than a bad book to never make it into print.

That said, what constitutes a bad book? Is it an overrated "good" book? Can an otherwise good

author produce a "bad" book? Is the badness in style, in execution? Or is it in theme or outlook? Or is the notion of a "bad" book even comprehensible in the age of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and cultural studies?

Calling the question of "bad books" to the fore elicited—as might be expected—an overwhelming response. The forty responses below were selected to demonstrate the sheer variety of responses to what at face value seems a simple question. But as with most literary matters, nothing is as simple as it

appears—not even the question of what constitutes a bad book.

From Eyal Amiran's comments on the badness of Bond to Zahi Zalloua's asking whether the state of bad books is hopeless, you'll find that there's a lot to think about when it comes to the question of bad books. Some of the comments you'll find agreeable; others disagreeable. Regardless, after reading them we think that you'll at least agree that there is just as much to say about bad books as there is to say about good ones.

TOP 40 Bad Books

A Spectre Haunts Bad Novels

Eyal Amiran

University of California, Irvine

The problem with bad books is to find, as Friedrich Nietzsche counsels, worthy enemies. A bad book has to be interesting, or we wouldn't care. Strong schmaltz is an option, like *The Little Prince* (1943) or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) (carry the light, anyone?), but pure genre work is a better bad. It can talk back, though no one is doing the talking. In fact, that's the appeal of genre work.

Ian Fleming's novels consist entirely of clichés, coordinating conjunctions, and appositives. No renaissance man, commander Bond is nobody, a super zero ("a neutral figure," Fleming calls him) who lives to advertise a watch—set, as they are in magazines, to ten past ten. He's a "secret agent" who tells anyone his name. Being an agent, he cannot act for himself, and going everywhere, he has no real home and lives in a no-man's land where every side has another side, a third side that can be the second

side of the first two sides, so that the opposing sides often find themselves on the same side.

For this reason, Fleming replaced the Soviet SMERSH with SPECTRE in several of the novels. "Special Executive for Counterintelligence, Terrorism, Revenge, and Extortion" is independent and itself hides behind FIRCO, an agency that locates French resistance fighters from the war. Because SPECTRE stands for the multiplication of sides, it can animate the iterability of Bond while producing his correlative individualism and invulnerability. The series could not continue if the enemy, once vanquished, were simply the other side. Bond is irreplaceable because he is *double*, one who "only lives twice," who "never says never," for whom "the world is not enough." Cheesy, laughable, and iterative: the writer who brought you a fudge recipe in *Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang* (1964) introduces the bondsman of global capital.

Revolutionary Road

Sean Bernard

University of La Verne

See the legion of admirers of *Revolutionary Road* (1961): many of my peers, Ben Marcus, Kate Winslet, Kurt Vonnegut, *Time Magazine*. I suspect Laura Bush and Joe Biden, as well.

Of it Richard Yates told *Ploughshares*:

I meant it more as an indictment of American life in the 1950s. Because during the Fifties there was a general lust for conformity all over this country, by no means only in the suburbs—a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security...a great many Americans were deeply disturbed by all that...

Good literature inspires emotion that is transferred beyond simple admiration ("magic seems neat") into reality ("Having read this novel, I must weep"). This emotion can be internal or external. It can be anything: moral outrage, jaded humor, deep sorrow, a reassurance that one is not alone, etc. *Better literature* inspires emotions we haven't admitted we possess; it awakens us to the deep complexity within—works, then, that illuminate the (our) human spirit.

Revolutionary Road tells me:

1) 1950s suburban America had limited outlets for the creatively inclined.

2) Conformity was then rampant.

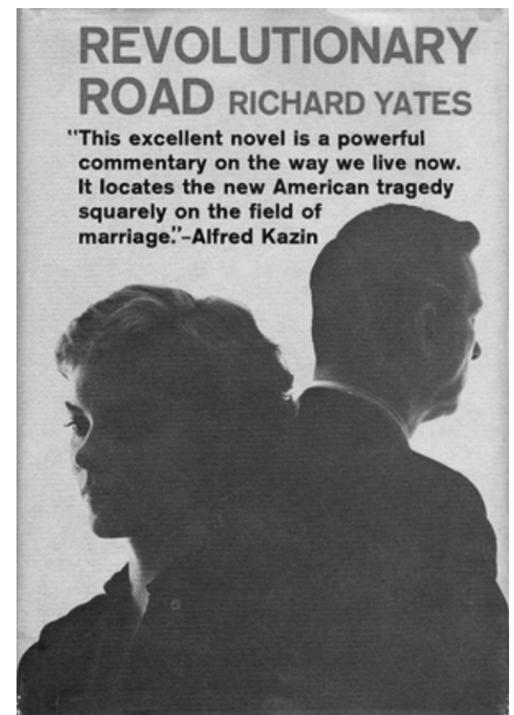
3) People who lie to themselves are unhappy.

4) People who feel superior to their surroundings are frustrated.

By this, I am as illuminated as I am by a college essay decrying drunk driving.

(And yet my peers, and Vonnegut, and Marcus...)

Why is it bad? Because it's tricked so many into thinking it's good.



Bad Books

R.M. Berry

Florida State University

What makes a book bad? It gives me small joy to hear the judgment pronounced, even by me, since the effect is always stifling, regardless intent. Underlying it is an insinuation that we know what's lacking, that spread-eagle badness restores our faith in norms. Not that bad books aren't legion. Christ!!! But after piling on, I always need a bath. E. M. Forster pronounced Gertrude Stein bad, and it would be pleasing to retort that the joke's on him, but who is reckless enough to explain why? In truth, no book has ever made a difference to me that someone whose judgment I respected didn't find execrable.

Genre books aren't bad. They are the paradigm of good books. If any writing can be justified, romances and Westerns and mysteries and

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ABR welcomes its new associate editors



Cris Mazza is the author of fifteen books, including ten novels, four collections of stories, and a collection of personal essays. She is presently director of the Program for Writers at the University of Illinois at Chicago.



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pornography can, being like the stain on a napkin, exactly the size of themselves. Hasn't everybody on occasion wished for badder books? Roland Barthes famously remarked that he wrote books because he didn't like the books he read. When younger I thought he must be talking about the books reviewers called bad, but later I realized books like that rarely inspire anybody. Is badness, at bottom, more like incompetence or like evil? Ronald Sukenick once confided to me his ambition to write books no one would know how to judge *either* bad or good. I feel that.

I dream of the book so horrendous it denies me peace, tracks me down in my haven, and compels me to vomit rejoinders. To think that the author of *How It Is* (1964) won the Nobel Prize! Bad writing has its muse, its geniuses.

The Effort of Bad Writing

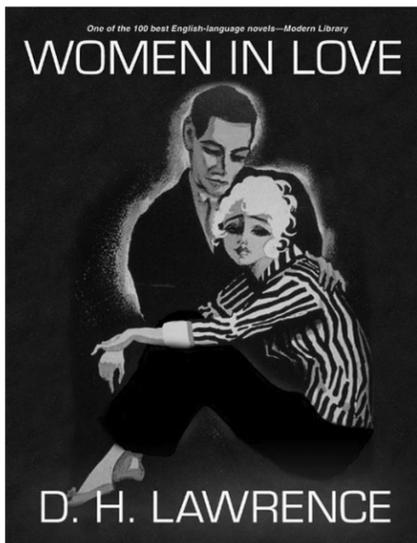
Michael Bérubé

Pennsylvania State University

Women in Love (1920) by D. H. Lawrence. As the great W. Y. Tindall once wrote,

Gudrun dances, for no reason, before cows. They understand. Even Hermione, that intellectual, has her moments. In voluptuous consummation with violence, she hits Birkin on the head with her paperweight. He goes off to lie among the flowers and, on returning to full consciousness, approves of her momentary triumph over repression.

Or as Andy Bienen, my grad-school colleague turned screenwriter, more pithily put it, "It's like someone put a gun to Nietzsche's head and made him write a Harlequin romance." No question, it took a lot of effort to produce a book that bad.



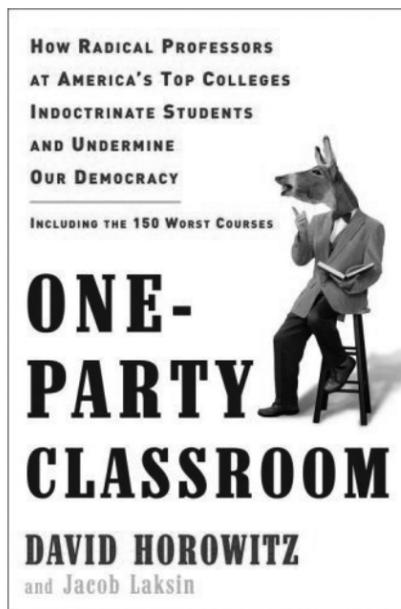
A Failed Hit Job

Marc Bousquet

Santa Clara University

One-Party Classroom (2009) by David Horowitz and Jacob Laksin. What's worse than the kind of right-wing drivel that gives yellow journalism a bad name? A ghost-authored sequel, padded with over 150 witless, tendentious summaries of courses that Horowitz erroneously imagined would frighten Middle America into hauling the faculty up the nearest telephone pole. At least the first book in this series, *The Professors* (2006), gave the "101 Most Dangerous Academics in America" something to brag about in their red-diaper parent-participation preschools (whilst plotting Trotskyite mayhem from behind piled bookshelves). This book just goes after the syllabi, not the scholarship of the faculty, and the somnolence it produces is hard to describe. Evidently, they should have credited Google as the third

author. The Horowitz staffers tasked with compiling this stinker simply trolled online campus catalogs to yield course descriptions using such democracy-undermining terms as "justice," "inequality," "race," and "feminism," then wrote lame descriptions characterizing the syllabi as part of a plot to deprive William Gates and Dick Cheney of their hard-earned profits. Once I got the concept, I briefly held the flickering hope that I could read it ironically—as in, "hey, what a bunch of good classes I wish I'd been able to take in college." Wrong. The relentless, narrow-minded prose thoroughly poisoned any hope of snarky thoughtcrime. Even if you were one of the twits sympathetic to the political angle of this failed hit job, the concrete brutalism of its formal properties would crush your spirit in a few pages—like reading a year's worth of your daily horoscopes straight through, or a cookbook cover to cover.



Academic Standards

Nicholas Brown

University of Illinois at Chicago

Most academic books are bad. Nearly all of them. I doubt if the situation is particularly worse than at any other time. But there is something else I view as troubling: good books with bad proofreading and useless indexes. With a bad book, bad proofreading doesn't matter particularly, and a bad index doesn't matter at all. But what troubles me is that editors are publishing good books, books that will be cited for years and decades, as though they will be read once and left on the train. With a new author, perhaps the time investment isn't worth doing things right, though this indicates a telling lack of confidence in the material. But books by established authorities continue to emerge with distracting numbers of typos and lax fact checking—this is at least selfish, since it condemns the rest of us to endless [sic]s—and pointless onomastic indexes. As to that index, this is the digital age, I imagine an editor objecting, who needs it? To which I reply: make your full text available online and searchable (mangle the text any way you like, just give me the page number!) and I withdraw the complaint.

A Bad Book

Terry Caesar

San Antonio, Texas

Bad novels, like unhappy families, are bad in their own ways. Take Herman Melville's *Pierre* (1852)—so extravagantly mannered as to be barely readable, and yet so exquisitely conceived, so archly comic that you can emerge from its pages at last and think that the whole assemblage is pretty good; somehow the fact that the book is bad becomes either

irrelevant or else important in a whole new way.

Or consider Theodore Dreiser's *The Genius* (1915). I taught it once, and recalled to the class T.S. Eliot's great judgment of Henry James: "a mind so fine that no idea could violate it." Dreiser, we might venture, had a mind so crude any idea could violate it. And yet who could not somehow honor his wooden conceits as well as lumpish sentences? Not H. L. Mencken, who both loved them and loved to lambast them. Not even my students (though all were relieved to move on with the syllabus).

Of course, off as well as on the syllabus, most novels are bad. Bad, that is, in the words of the celebrated adage of the science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon, "ninety percent of everything is crud."

Their characters are dull, their themes hackneyed, their narratives derivative. They're scarcely bad in their own ways. What else to say?

Off the syllabus: nothing. On the syllabus: plenty.

To me, the most interesting examples of badness take place within approved academic discourses. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), for one example, is wondrously bad: stylistically precious, lavishly sentimental, ludicrous of characterization (poor Janie), incoherent of theme (poor Janie, who yet manages to all but literally kill two men). But the great thing about the novel is that none of this matters!

Whether from the point of view of feminism or African American culture, *Their Eyes* is a damn good book. How churlish now not so much to disagree as to intervene with other considerations altogether! Indeed, I feel so bad right now that I'm prepared to admit it's me that's bad, not Hurston. I should be picking on somebody who has either a more secure reputation or none at all.

Can we conclude today that there are no more bad books, only bad readers? Such readers don't know how to make even the worst books productive. Making them productive won't make them better. It will just take the whole category of good vs. bad off the seminar table, on which are stacked confident piles of *Their Eyes*.

The Bad Staggers On

John Domini

Drake University

A handful of parody responses occur to me, such as a Euclidean proof of why one of my own books is bad. But to play it straight, we should ask, why isn't "bad" in the eye of the beholder? Why should a reader go with anything other than his or her gut? What's the use of a critic? The challenge is everywhere these days: on reader-centric websites such as Goodreads (which I quite enjoy), and on too many blogs to count. To see into the truly bad takes training; one needs to discern what a book's assumptions are and how it betrays them—usually by falling back on ghost-gestures, some mimicry of the passions long since leached of value. But the crisis of so much contemporary criticism, especially in the mainstream review forums, is that the old gestures are the only ones most of the mighty Brahmins understand. Most reviews these days seem written by a software program, with inserts selected off an all-too-familiar menu: click, "vivid settings," click, "tormented characters." Thus, bad staggers on, propped up by dunderheads. Small wonder readers doubt the worth of a review such as this (which I couldn't live without).

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Very Baad Books

David B. Downing

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Let's face it: we all know that when you add the extra vowel, baad is the ultimate term of endearment. All hipster, counter-culture, soul searchers love baad stuff, perhaps ever since Melvin Van Peebles's 1971 movie *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. That's because it does the right stuff: it refuses conformity to the powers that be; it refuses to take seriously all the high-falutin' ideals and pretenses; it gets down with the real folks, whoever they might be. And it's a pretty rigorous taxonomy, best used, of course, for the contemporary, the latest baad stuff. But you could take it back a bit, using the same criteria and say that, for instance, *Madame Bovary* (1857) is baad—so is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), Henry Miller's *Sexus* (1949) and *Nexus* (1960), Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938), Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes's *Mule Bone* (1930), Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* (1964), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and so on—you get the point, there's a lot of baad stuff there that's really good.

But can a book be baad and bad at the same time given this taxonomy? The answer has to be: of course. The book can be hip, cool, revolutionary, code breaking on many levels, but just plain crappy. Examples will have to work here, and so I'm going to nominate for dual honors Bob Dylan's 1966 classic baad book, *Tarantula*. If this isn't baad and bad at the same time, I give up. So I'm just going to end with the first, well, let's call it "sentence" of the book:

aretha/ crystal jukebox queen of hymn & him diffused in drunk transfusion wound would heed sweet soundwave crippled & cry salute to oh great particular el dorado reel & ye battered personal god but she cannot she the leader of whom when ye follow, she cannot she has no back she cannot...

If you love that, you know you're baad, no matter that the book itself is bad.

Dildo Cay

Jonathan P. Eburne

Pennsylvania State University

"They're not flamingoes, Adrian thought; there wouldn't be flamingoes on Dildo Cay in September." It is through this keen eye for regional detail that we encounter the opening lines of Nelson Hayes's 1940 novel, *Dildo Cay*, a very real book whose title is so outlandish as to have provoked an incredulous review (as well as a single star rating) on Amazon.com. The review, entitled "Elaborate hoax," reads:

I'm sorry to report that this book does not actually exist.... What's next? A bogus listing for "Goodnight Mooninite" to shill the Cartoon Network?

It is unfortunate that some people seem to think that Amazon is some sort of amusement park, like a literary Astroland, here for nothing more than their moronic brand of hedonism.

The book does, in fact, exist. Yet *Dildo Cay*—a salt-plantation melodrama set on a fictionalized island in the Turks and Caicos—warrants skepticism nonetheless. For starters, one questions the presumption that even the most sober war-era reader

would leap to associate the titular islet with the tall Caribbean cactuses that populate it, rather than, say, with artificial phalluses. All the same, there is already something impressive about a novel whose very dust jacket can prompt an Amazon.com browser to doubt its existence.

Yet *Dildo Cay* is bad in ways that surpass its title. The product less of an unsteady hand than of a resoundingly tin ear, the novel's prose is so categorically graceless as to supersede camp and plunge straight into ontological confusion. Herein, I'd like to suggest, is the triumph of an exquisitely bad book such as *Dildo Cay*: it is so earnestly bad as to call its own existence into question. In many ways, of course, the novel parades the typically forgettable qualities of other undistinguished midcentury fiction: tawdry displays of local color, liberal deployments of racism and misogyny, textbook Oedipal conflicts, and *the hypertrophic use of italics*. But *Dildo Cay* boasts countless passages that far exceed these indistinctions:

'Father, I want to talk with you!'

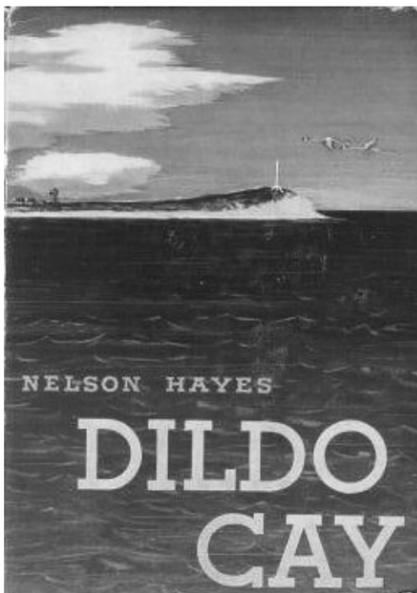
Adrian had been watching his father walk the dike unsteadily, and suddenly he had seen himself at the age of sixty walking the dike unsteadily, and on top of his restlessness it was too much for him.

'How strong do you think that pickle is?' his father asked, ignoring the tone of Adrian's voice.

If ever the family romance has so forcefully raised its pickle, I know few other novels so susceptible to accidental (?) allegory. We all walk the dike unsteadily.

It has become a minor ambition of mine to become a connoisseur, or at least a collector, of books as marvelously bad as *Dildo Cay*. Consider the Borgesian possibilities of such a library, especially given that one is spared from inventing its contents. The titles, the authors, and the prose are no less fictional for being real, historical artifacts.

Such books are not to be confused, however, with ephemera, whose material existence may once have been transitory, but which have instead been preserved against the ravages of time. Rather, the status of a bad book like *Dildo Cay* represents something akin to an eclipse: these are books whose material form raises the same doubts, the same questions about their existence, as their outlandish titles. My gradually increasing library of such bad books now boasts titles such as Mary Wood-Allen's *What a Young Woman Ought to Know* (1898), Frances Neuman's *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* (1926), Virginia Elliott's post-Prohibition *Quiet Drinking* (1933), and Isaac Cronin's *The International Squid Cookbook* (1981). What's next? To quote the novel's closing line: "Keep your jib full...our course is for Dildo Cay."



Tipping Point of Badness

Amy J. Elias

University of Tennessee

Badness in the *historical novel* is particularly discomfiting because the novelist makes an implicit contract with the reader for verisimilitude of historical context, character, or idea, and then the form itself guarantees that she can never fully deliver. By design, historical fictions always embed a thesis about history, and their badness becomes a matter of tipping point rather than failure. Badness enters the nonparodic historical novel when an author overtly uses historically situated people, places, and cultures as mirrors, and denies their difference. It is easy to fool readers who don't know history about how historical a novel is, and literary studies has made us believe that verisimilitude is a politically disingenuous ideal anyway, so one feels retrograde saying that in the historical novel, the tipping point of badness is a failure of dialogue, a moment when a thesis about history becomes cocksure. But there it is. It is the tipping point when an author transcribes only his own desire echoing from the past.

It happens in very good novels by very good novelists. It happens in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) when Morrison refuses fully to open her mind to seventeenth-century religious life, in *The March* (2005) when E. L. Doctorow rewrites historical fact to such little purpose that his thesis goes banal. It happens in *Saturday* (2005), an oddly historical novel of the present, when Ian McEwan implies that a good poem read well can turn the hearts of men from violence to fraternity, a wishful thesis about terror in our time. These moments of badness are moments of authorial ego when dialogism fails. But they also are slippages that instruct about our own moment: an author's desires, the reader's own face in the glass.

A Species of Sorryness

Dagoberto Gilb

University of Houston-Victoria

Like bad girlfriends (and boyfriends, too), there are so many categories of bad books that it'd be gruesome and pathetic to categorize the various species of that sorryness. Setting aside the intrinsically aggravating that the very coquetish author is actually stupid, or the editor who chose the manuscript is too dumb or lame or dazzled, or that the system which perpetuates both of them is as flawed as a university paying for a Glenn Beck lecture series, and omitting the writers who are really salespeople, as are their duped or complicit publishers hyping their so pretty product as though.... Wait a minute, that may be what I think is a major bad book or line of them even.

As admirable as any delusion which fuels grandeur, this kind of writing—more about the writer than the writing—not only fulfills that mirror, mirror on the wall writer, but, like political demagoguery, pumps mass appeal in (talking only literature here) skewed and depressing ways.

A Taste for Quarantine

Gerald Graff

University of Illinois at Chicago

It has always seemed strange to me that bad books aren't a prominent part of our school and college literature curriculum. How do we expect

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students to learn to tell the difference between good and bad books unless we assign some bad ones for comparison? Don't you need badness in order to know goodness?

I can only conclude that those who have determined the literature curriculum have been more interested in protecting the good or great books from contamination—that is, in feeling virtuous about their own tastes—than they are in helping students understand what they read. There is also the view, though, that reading good books is itself sufficient—no reason to read bad ones for comparison, especially since some students might think some of the bad ones are good and vice-versa, or might catch on to the fact that which books are good or bad is often alarmingly debatable.

The best thing I've ever read on the question of literary value, by the way, is a chapter entitled "Evaluation" in *Making Sense of Literature* (1977) by the late John Reichert. This book deserves greater prominence.

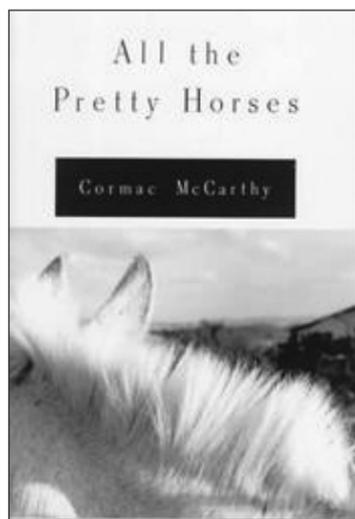
Romance for Men

Christine Granados

Texas A&M University

I believe that the novel is a blueprint into a writer's soul. Anyone who has ever attempted to write one knows how much of the author is embedded into its sentences and structure. When I read what I consider to be a bad book, I notice that it is usually written by an arrogant person.

Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) comes immediately to mind. I think of it as a romance novel for men, his trilogy included. Like all good romance novel writers, McCarthy uses clichés and derivative characters to sell millions of copies.



He gives men a romanticized view of manliness. McCarthy wraps his characters in half-truths and idealized anecdotes, much like Jackie Collins does, only his are about the Lone Star State, the border, and its cowboy myths. His strong, silent, and very American John Grady

Cole is a main character that can only come from reading Louis L'Amour pulp fiction and watching John Wayne and Clint Eastwood Westerns.

McCarthy, originally from Tennessee by way of Rhode Island, adds his superiority complex into the tale when he has Cole and his two companions traverse the border into the wilds of Mexico where adventure awaits. Cole beds the "Felina" of McCarthy's imagination (only in this tale her name is Alejandra, and she is rich) and holds his own in a Mexico that is seen through his colonizing lens, meaning a foreign country filled with black and white (mostly black). The natives are either violent and corrupt or gentle and honest. Cole gets the best of these natives in the end, teaching them a thing or two about his truth and diplomacy, and heads back home to the good U.S. of A.

Is it any wonder that such a book was written by a man who said in an interview last year, "I ended up in the Southwest because I knew that nobody had ever written about it"?

Suspect

Carol Guess

Western Washington University

Heather Lewis's second novel, *Notice* (2004), is a work of genius. Underrated, rarely discussed, the book belongs with contemporary classics. It is perhaps the most disturbing book I've ever read, and among the most compelling. It illuminates the state of female, specifically lesbian, subjectivity under contemporary American regimes by deconstructing genres that have failed to capture women's experiences: pulp, noir, mystery, romance. It subverts these genres, yet never falls prey to the directives of political correctness.

Notice was published posthumously. Its narrative voice was so unique that no press would touch it until Lewis committed suicide at forty. Her suicide allowed the book's publication; now she was dead, and sufficiently chastened for examining experiences that mainstream culture attempts to suppress.

Before she killed herself, Lewis wrote one more novel, *The Second Suspect* (1998). This book was published and reviewed during her lifetime. It was bought, and it was read.

The Second Suspect is a terrible book. But it's not just a bad book; it's so much more. It's a bad book riffing off the author's masterpiece. *The Second Suspect* is a rewriting of *Notice*, but minus everything that makes *Notice* literary. *The Second Suspect* takes plot, characters, and themes from *Notice* and reduces them to formulaic drivel.

The Second Suspect is the work of an author who understood that her masterpiece had been censored, tossed aside, misunderstood. So she sat down and rewrote it. She made it bad, deliberately bad. And the public loved it.



Buckets of Peanut Butter

Kim Herzinger

University of Houston-Victoria

We don't know the really bad books. The really bad books, most of them, were never published. They're out there, though, hundreds of thousands of them, in drawers, in a box in the garage, in publishing house dumpsters worldwide. Some of them, perhaps, are buried deep in the dumpsters of vanity press publishing houses. Perhaps there are books so unclaimably bad that even the money the author was willing to put out for publication just wasn't enough. Perhaps, once, even a vanity press house turned in shame, refunded the money, and bandied the words "it's just not for us" around the room. Perhaps.

Perhaps the people who are writing us emails from Nigeria, telling us we are heirs to 2.35 million dollars if we would only allow them to deposit it in our accounts (enter your routing number and account number, please)—perhaps they are writing books,

too. What would they be like? They would, I believe, be bad. Really bad.

But of course what we are talking about here, I think, are the bad books that have been published. Better yet, we are talking about the bad books that have—at one time or another—been thought by a significant number of people to be good. These buckets of peanut butter—Donald Barthelme's phrase for bad books—sit sadly on the shelves of every used bookstore in the world, hundreds and hundreds of bad books, wretched books, books once produced by gleeful publishers and bought by hopeful readers, books which await new company from the buckets of peanut butter now sprightly lining the shelves at Barnes & Noble and Borders.

But what we are really talking about are bad books which have been seriously acclaimed as good books, even great ones. Or, at least, bad books written by writers who have been acclaimed as good, even great. With this we enter into a more joyous world, a world of laughter and tears. *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950), *Grimus* (1975), *The End of the Affair* (1951), half of John Updike, the bad William Wordsworth, the bad Percy Bysshe Shelley. And now, big danger: *Pamela* (1740), the poems of James Joyce, *Frankenstein* (1818).

I am in trouble now, so I will get out of it. *Frankenstein* is a book made great by its badness. We cannot do without it. Nor can we do without one more book, the greatest bad book in the English language. It is not great in the way that *Frankenstein* is great, of course. It is great because it cannot but deeply entertain us with its earnest vigor, its invincible belief in its own genius, its merciless craft, its transcendent obliviousness. I give you this, if you have not already heard: *Poetic Gems* by William McGonagall, poet and tragedian.

Failed Expectations

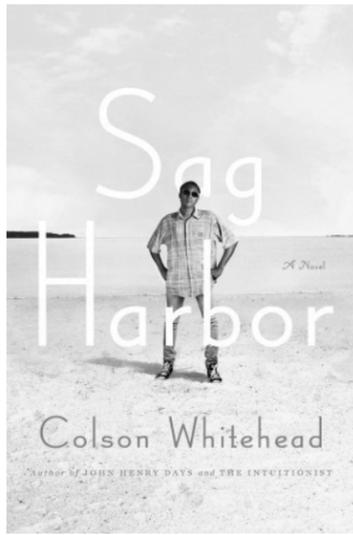
Walter R. Jacobs

University of Minnesota

I liked [*Sag Harbor*], but did not love it or really like it as I do [Colson Whitehead's] other books (especially *The Intuitionist*). I can't put my finger on exactly why. Perhaps it's that the other books have either a slightly unreal aspect (e.g., *Elevator Inspectors* intuiting elevator functioning), or are larger than life (the subject of *John Henry Days*). Whatever the reason, it's still worth a read, but I don't think that this is the best work of Colson Whitehead.

The above is my July 2009 review of Colson Whitehead's coming-of-age novel *Sag Harbor* (2009) on the social networking site Goodreads. The "Bad Books" project is helping me complete my thoughts. *Sag Harbor* is bad because it fails to live up to high expectations (*The Intuitionist* [2000] is on my Top 10 favorite books list). I'd now add that it's bad because it's hyphenated: many reviews (on Goodreads and elsewhere) note that *Sag Harbor* is "semi-autobiographical"; the "semi" should have been deleted! As a privileged African American with experiences similar to those of the main character, a memoir would have really activated serious personal reflection. Instead, in many places I found myself stuck on questions like "Did that happen to the real Colson?" and "This passage is definitely fake," instead of "I'm reminded of the time when I..." or "I should have been..." So, in sum, *Sag Harbor* is a "bad book" because it fails to fully open multiple new worlds for me, as do Whitehead's other efforts.

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Setting a Bad Example

Steven G. Kellman

University of Texas at San Antonio

Any week's bestseller list offers a bounty of bad books. Though hardly as bad as some, the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century earned the opprobrium it once attracted. In 1949, when Harriet Beecher Stowe's literary tour of what her subtitle calls *Life Among the Lowly* was out of print, James Baldwin encountered scant argument for writing: "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a very bad novel, having, in its self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality, much in common with *Little Women*." However, sentimentality has since been sentimentalized as a strategy for validating women's voices, and Stowe and Louisa May Alcott have both been canonized. *A Jury of Her Peers* (2009), Elaine Showalter's new history of American women's literature, pronounces *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) "an American masterpiece" and its author "a great writer, a daring and forceful architect of narrative, a gifted painter of character, and a sophisticated manager of symbolism, irony, and allegory." In his lavishly annotated edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (2006), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. offers absolution for its racist attitudes.

Yet it is hard not to cringe when told that Tom "had the soft, impressible nature of his kindly race, ever yearning toward the simple and childlike" or that:

The negro, it must be remembered, is an exotic of the most gorgeous and superb countries of the world, and he has, deep in his heart, a passion for all that is splendid, rich, and fanciful; a passion which, rudely indulged by an untrained taste, draws on them the ridicule of the colder and more correct white race.

George Orwell called *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "a good bad book." It did good by targeting "the peculiar institution" that reduced human beings to chattel. But, substituting sanctimony for empathy and polemic for poetry, it set a bad example for literary art.



Heartbreaking

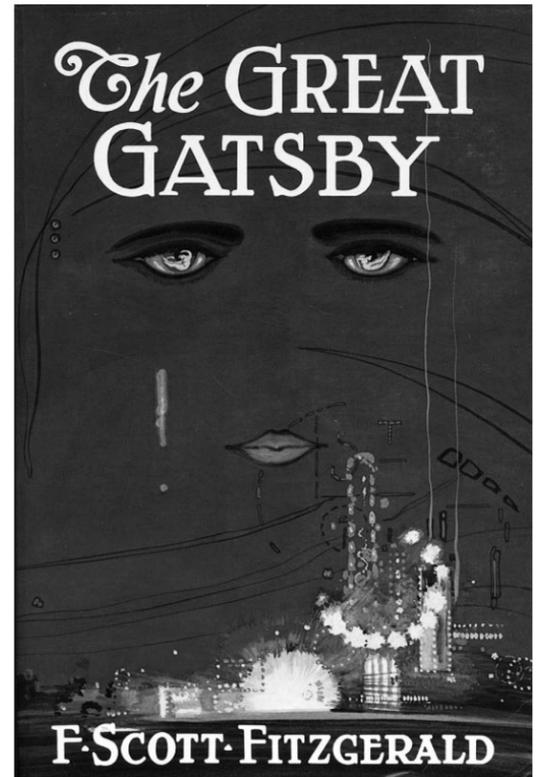
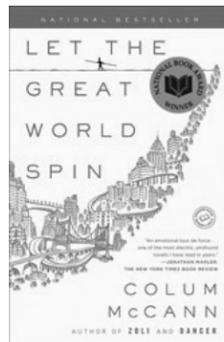
Judith Kitchen

Pacific Lutheran University

I love almost everything Colum McCann has written, so I was surprised at my frustration with *Let the Great World Spin* (2009).

How do I not love thee? Let me count the ways:

- 1) It does not live up to McCann's own standards—does not have the inherent empathy of *Everything in This Country Must* (2001) or the inventive vitality of *Dancer* (2003).
- 2) Its romanticized two-dimensional, cutout characters (troubled priest, cheerful prostitute, wealthy matron, ineffectual judge, single black mother) strut and fret their hour on an unconvincing stage.
- 3) Its "plot" is overtly manipulated; its almanac details—pull rings on Coke cans, dimes in the jukebox, A-line dresses—seem meant to provide what W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan called "merely corroborative detail." One should not want to play "gotcha" with a novel, but instead willingly enter its spinning world.
- 4) Its "message" remains obscure. Eight years after 9/11, it's impossible to read the opening image—the figure of a man modeled on Philippe Petit walking a tightrope between the unfinished Twin Towers—without thinking surely this stunt/spectacle will comment indirectly on post-9/11 America. McCann claims to be "more interested in those...walking the tightrope on the ground," but by juxtaposing Petit's deliberate risk taking with lives lost in Vietnam, he belabors a flimsy point. The book knows neither the New York City of 1974 nor the underlying nature of our national grief: our loss of innocence.
- 5) And then, there's the poetry! The book crackles like a literary scavenger hunt as McCann drops line after increasingly annoying quoted line. Despite reviews that hail the novel as a "heartbreaking symphony," my heart only breaks because it falls apart; the center cannot hold.



Walking Hypothesis

Sue-Im Lee

Temple University

One breed of a bad book is a disappointing novel from an author for whom you harbor expectations. Previous encounters with this author's novels have pleased you immensely, and you look forward to another opportunity. This opportunity comes surprisingly early and frequently, since this author publishes a novel every few years. But by the third novel, you experience growing indignation at the familiarity of it all. Only the names have been changed to play out the central drama that this author finds so compelling—same things seem to be cause for concern, same tensions seem to afflict the characters, and same language floats out to manifest this fictional world.

The thing is, you shared the compulsion for the first two or three novels. By the third novel, you were aware that your perfunctory appreciation was largely based on good faith. So when you encounter the disappointing novel, the author's credit is not only depleted, there is a lien placed against it. The novel feels like a walking hypothesis. In fact, from this vantage point, *all* this author's novels are walking hypothesis. You try to be charitable about the predictability of human thinking, a human condition, but you can't exonerate an author whose hypothesis has become tiresome through repetitiveness. These are the bad books I encounter in contemporary fiction, books that appear too quickly upon the heels of the last one, books that never had a chance at acquiring their own language and drama.

Teaching Bad Books

Sophia A. McClennen

Pennsylvania State University

In almost every class, I teach a bad book, an awful, poorly written, sometimes sexist, racist, reactionary book.

I do this for a few reasons. First of all, I do it to see if my students notice. I taught a selection of stories by Isabel Allende in a course on Latin American women writers while teaching in Peru. The day I walked in to teach the students were all mumbling under the breath, casting semi-hostile looks at me. They had hated it. Thought it was really bad. Thought she couldn't write, thought her stories were sexist and

Gatsby

Tom LeClair

The University of Cincinnati

If badness is related to perceived greatness, then I offer *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as the worst novel in American literature. I haven't read it for many years, since the only time I used it in a Modern American Fiction class, but I remember it as incredibly smug about its relationship to the traditional realistic novel. While Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and others were taking chances, F. Scott Fitzgerald was manipulating conventions to create a book that would be "charming." One could blame Nick the narrator, but I think Fitzgerald is responsible. I turned to *Tender Is the Night* (1934), usually considered a bad book, to give students a Fitzgerald with more aesthetic courage and, for all that novel's sentimentality, more profundity about money and marriage.

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derivative of masters like Gabriel García Márquez. But they assumed that I had to like it or I wouldn't have put it on the syllabus. When they found out I hated it too, we had a great time in class trashing it critically and learning a lot in the process.

So now you know that other reason I like to teach bad books. I like to trash them. I like to teach my students that they can trash bad books. Too much reverence for the literary can float around graduate programs in literature. We feel besieged as our programs shrink and our students dwindle, and the result can be an odd, misplaced aura of the book. That is no good. All literature is not good. Some is really bad, and we need to learn how to talk about why it is bad. And we need to have some fun doing it. Without the recognition and railing about the bad book, there can be no real pleasure in the good one.

I just finished my graduate syllabus for this term. I have a really, really bad one on there. I wonder if the students will notice.

Realistic Exhaustion

John McGowan

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

What I ask for from a novel is easily stated—and very difficult to accomplish. The storyteller, whether distanced from the events narrated or a character implicated in them, must come across as a “man speaking to men” (to use William Wordsworth’s formula). I must believe the storyteller is a person talking to me about matters of real concern and in a voice a real person would use in earnest conversation with another. Basic, boring realist aesthetics, you might say—and it is true that I read “serious fiction” compulsively while having no taste for fantasy, science fiction, mystery, or other “genre” novels, and a limited tolerance for avant-garde writers like Kathy Acker, Thomas Bernhard, or even David Foster Wallace. And so, yes, within my chosen world of realistic fiction, bad writing fails to provide an interesting angle, an arresting take, on the world it unfolds. Here’s a good example of bad writing, from Geraldine Brooks’s much-praised *People of the Book* (2008):

Faber’s pale hands caressed each volume.
He turned the pages with exquisite care.

AMERICAN BOOK REVIEW

SUBSCRIBING TO IT IS AN ACT OF LITERARY RESPONSIBILITY.
—The Wilson Library Bulletin

ONE OF THE NATION'S LIVELIEST GENERAL-PURPOSE
READER'S GUIDES TO EVERYTHING.
—Michael Bérubé

<http://americanbookreview.org>

As he fingered the rarest of codices, peering at the faded inks and delicate, veined parchments, his expression changed. He moistened his lips. Serif noted that his pupils were dilated, like a lover's.

The reader who can be pulled into this world or moved by such a direct attempt to call forth an emotion is not me.

Much more interesting are the writers who struggle with the exhaustion of the realistic mode, but who are still determined to tell a story. What kind of voice can such a writer provide when hyper-aware that, as William H. Gass puts it, all novelists are liars. Here's two samples from two contemporary American novelists.

He'd always thought of himself as a progressive. He believed in the perfectibility of the republic. He thought, for instance, that there was no reason the Negro could not with proper guidance carry every burden of human achievement. He did not believe in aristocracy except of individual effort and vision.

And the second:

He took the lamp from beside the bed and jerked the cord free and climbed up onto the dresser and stove in the grate with the metal lampshade and pulled it loose and looked in. He could see the dragmarks in the dust. He climbed down and stood there. He'd got blood and matter on his shirt from off the wall and he took the shirt off and went back into the bathroom and washed himself and dried with one of the bath-towels.

Good or bad writing isn't found in sentence structure or word choice. The first writer establishes an ironic distance from sentiments he cannot endorse, but which he can get “inside” of, and which he relates in the epiphanic moment that his character experiences a moment of self-doubt. The second writer uses distance as a shield from all sentiment, to be the recording angle who reveals no angle of vision, nothing about himself as narrator or his characters as people. It's all story—and it's all pointless. And, worst of all, to me it sounds all affected, a tough-guy persona that I don't believe for a moment. I am baffled by the high regard in which Cormac McCarthy (the quote is from *No Country For Old Men* [2005]) is held. Give me E. L. Doctorow (*Ragtime* [1975]) every time.

On Being Bad

Brian McHale

The Ohio State University

When we are invited to reflect on “bad books,” I take it that what is really meant is “books that *somebody* misguidedly thinks are good”; otherwise, why bother? After all, the world is full of bad books that nobody would bother to argue about. For instance, I read a lot of science fiction, and plenty of it is pretty bad, but so what? Who wants to hear about my discoveries in the lower reaches of genre fiction, or to argue about whether (say) the last volume of David Wingrove's *Chung Kuo* series is bad or not? Badness comes with the territory. Nothing's at stake.

But if I call a book “bad” when something is at stake—when, by some criteria, it *ought* to qualify as good; when it's a bestseller (*The Da Vinci Code* [2003]), or a text by a canonical author (Theodore Dreiser), or one that turns up on course syllabi for reasons that somebody might find dubious (piety, political correctness; *Their Eyes Were Watching*

God [1937])—then what I'm really saying isn't that the *book* is bad but that its *readers* are bad; or, more to the point, that they're not as good as *I* am. Their taste is bad, where mine (of course) is refined; their education is inadequate, compared to mine; they're susceptible to being distracted by commerce or ideology or piety or the prestige of big names, whereas I'm immune to all that, etc., etc. This seems, well, invidious; anyway, I don't think I really want to go there. Let a thousand flowers bloom. Let readers read as they please, and what they please.

Classic Bad Books

Paul Allen Miller

University of South Carolina

Bad books in my field, classics and comparative literature, come in two primary varieties. The first is the easiest to spot. These books are generally dull plodding affairs in which a hobbyhorse is ridden into the ground over several hundred pages. They often include long lists and tables but very little real analysis or probing argument. The prose is wooden and the documentation laborious. Many of these are unrevised dissertations. They are often published by what are uncharitably termed vanity presses: for profit companies with little if any objective refereeing of manuscripts (e.g., some allow you to pick your own referees). These presses often demand hefty subventions, print only very small runs, and expect the authors to do almost all the editorial work. They profit off the need of academics to publish books for tenure and promotion. They take advantage of the naïve who believe that getting something between hard covers will be their ticket to professional success or at least survival, when often all it means is that either the authors or their institutions will be out several thousand dollars.

The second variety of bad books represents the mirror image of the first. These books make audacious claims, profess to shift the reigning paradigms in their field, and are often written with a decided rhetorical panache. They feature little in the way of real supporting evidence and offer specious or circular argumentation in favor of their grandiose claims. They are almost always books by well-known senior figures in their fields and published by well-respected academic and commercial presses. They have been nominally refereed, but because of the prestige of their authors and the relatively large potential sales anticipated by the press, these books are allowed to get by with a degree of argumentative and evidentiary sloppiness that would never be tolerated in the work of more junior colleagues. Such books allow unsupported claims to become current in their respective academic disciplines, and it is only the prospect of rigorous and critical reviews in major journals that serve as a break on their pernicious effects.

An Idiomatic Inferno

Christian Moraru

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

In Jean-Paul Sartre's 1944 play *Huis clos* (*No Exit*), a character, Garcin, infamously declares, “Hell is others.” What does that mean, many have asked themselves. Some have said that the pronouncement conveys the uneasiness the writer and modernity overall typically experience before “alterity.” Yet Sartre insisted that he had been “misunderstood.” What his character meant, he explained, was not that our relations with others are “infernal” by definition, but that if these relations are distorted, “then the other can

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be to us nothing else than hell” because “the others are the most important thing within ourselves that we can draw from to know who we are.” “When we think about ourselves, when we try to find out who we are,” Sartre went on, we “use the knowledge others already have of us. We form an opinion of ourselves by means of tools others have given us. Whatever I say about myself, an other’s judgment is always contained in it. This means that if my relations with an other are bad, I am completely dependent on this other. And then I am truly in hell” (my translation).

Before and after Sartre, the moderns (to say nothing of their postmodern heirs) have both recognized and disowned this dependence. It is not that our relationships with others are good, bad, and anything in between. It is just that, no matter how they are, they always define us and therefore shape our self-definitions, who we are, who we think we are, or what we want to be taken for. Like it or not, being entails being dependent on people and situations outside you. Autonomy is a superstition, solipsism an untenable view of things, and egotism unethical, in today’s “network society” more than ever.

One way of looking at bad books—one way of entertaining the notion that there are bad books at all in the wake of the culture wars, the canon debate, and multiculturalism—would be trying to figure out the degree to which the text in question allows for this outside, acknowledges this paramount dependence. Now, moderns like Sartre were ambivalent about it. A romantic aftershock, their authenticity standard was one of originality. To be authentic was to be original, and to be original was to be indebted to no one or at least to appear so. The postmoderns borrow overtly and revel in literary and cultural indebtedness. They call it intertextuality and define authenticity, and with it originality, rather correlatively. To them, the original writer handles—plays on, recycles, etc.—effectively a material, a theme, and even a project that in an important sense comes from and echoes an outside, an elsewhere, other times and places.

Surely some postmoderns do a better job than others. Needless to say, there are good postmodern books, and then there are some not so good. But what postmodernism can be said to be doing more and more these days—and thus possibly take postmodernism in a new direction altogether, and into a new cultural paradigm—is institutionalize this concern, implement this poetics of dependence systematically, and in the process ground our aesthetical judgments ethically.

Let us face it: yesterday’s “bad” books are on today’s syllabi. Think, for example, about the whole sentimental tradition, about romance, or about the “paraliterary” genres. Things change, as they must, standards evolve (some say, collapse), benchmarks shift, for all the usually stated and unstated reasons. What does not go away is, first, the writers’ and their books’ genetic “dependence” on others—precursors, audiences, “the people out there” beyond the familial and the familiar—and, second, the talent and honesty with which that connection is incorporated, accounted for, and paid homage to. To write is to write with and ultimately for others. Writing is moving toward others, says Paul Auster. We write, adds Julia Kristeva, to honor the foreign—as we should, strangers to ourselves as we quintessentially are.

To my mind, the worst books bask ignorantly in a sort of stultifying self-centeredness hard to fathom, by me at least. Exercises in navel-gazing and simplistically formulaic, their horizon is exceedingly narrow. They do not care and are not curious. They do not explore and do not take risks. They do not draw from a world, nor do they not call out to one, and in that do not “project” one either, as Thomas Pynchon’s character famously puts it. Bad books may be, to some, stylistically exquisite—for now, for this scholastic-aesthetical moment—but usher you into

the idiomatic inferno of narrow-mindedness and delusional autarchy. They do not speak to you because they are busy speaking to themselves.

Textual Snowflakes

Daniel T. O’Hara

Temple University

I decide a book is bad if I get angrier and angrier as I read it. That happens rarely. But if I discover an author cheating, by taking shortcuts, not doing the necessary homework however long it might take, relying on second-hand knowledge, overlooking the other sides of the issue, or experience, then I am ready to explode, and so I know it is a bad book. If I am served up a self-interested snow job these days, it is usually done in the name of a good cause, which makes it harder to criticize.

Wai Chee Dimock’s *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (2006) is my choice. The book received honorable mentions in nationally prestigious contests, and leading Americanists have given it their endorsements. The gist of its argument, taken from its publisher’s website, is, “Throughout, Dimock contends that American literature is answerable not to the nation-state, but to the human species as a whole, and that it looks dramatically different when removed from a strictly national or English-language context.”

I applaud this goal, yet all of the texts drawn from global contexts “across deep time” are presented in English translations. Henry James’s novels and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, to give one comic example, get read together. I know—in this case, who cares? But this is true throughout. Knowing a text in its original language and cultural contexts is crucial. If such knowledge is removed, due to the scholar’s inadequacies or the assumed reader’s, the result is readings lacking resonance, depth, weight. Reading then is like looking at a child’s shaken snow globe, with the texts-snowflakes gradually settling down to one common level. All are globally equal now but equally bland and banal.

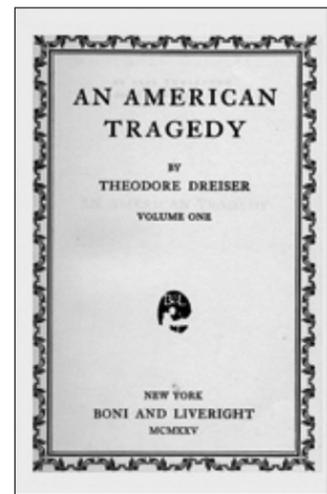
Ending Badly

William A. O’Rourke

University of Notre Dame

I’ve been telling students for many years that Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925) is one of the best American novels, up until the time Clyde is caught, then it goes into the toilet, more or less. A great book than goes down hill at the end. Recently, I looked at it again, to see if what I have thought for so long is true. *AAT* is divided into three books; book three is essentially a police procedural, and here Dreiser makes use of what was historic material, since a similar killing had taken place, along with a circus-like trial, a fixture of the era, some twenty years earlier, one that had “inspired” the book. So, part of the problem is that there’s a lot of telling at the end, unlike the showing that had been going on earlier, such as the “murder” scene on the lake. In that way, the first two thirds of *AAT* is more a product of Dreiser’s imagination, until reality takes over, since the actual murderer did not share Clyde’s fictional background. The character of Clyde had been pulled out of Dreiser’s own murky inner life. Dreiser has never been accused of being a stylist, so a difference in language is not the question; it is more a matter of Dreiser letting the public record interfere with his re-imagining. In any case, in the 1951 movie, *A Place in the Sun*, directed by George Stevens, Stevens spends hardly any time on

the trial or Clyde’s incarceration. There is an old Hollywood saw: “You take good books and make bad movies, and you take bad books and make good movies.” *A Place in the Sun* is a wonderful movie, but it pushes only one part of Dreiser’s novel. Stevens has Elizabeth Taylor come visit Clyde on death row, whereas, in the novel, no such meeting with Sondra, the rich girl, takes place, and when Clyde is marched off to the death chamber, Elizabeth Taylor’s face is superimposed behind Montgomery Clift, and Clift’s expression can only be read to mean that it is worth being executed in order to have dated Elizabeth Taylor, not the message that Dreiser wanted to convey. *ATT*, though, is a great novel, great enough to survive a bad ending in either medium.



Poetic Throwback

Marjorie Perloff

Stanford University

The various poetry books collected in Frederick Seidel’s blockbuster *Poems 1959–2009* (2009) have won extravagant praise from important poet-critics like Michael Hofmann (“*Life on Earth* is an exemplary book...[o]ne of the best by an American poet in the past twenty years”) and Lawrence Joseph, who declares in *The Nation* that Seidel is “one of the most vital and important poets we have.” What the critics (almost all male, I should note) seem to like about Seidel is his candor—his willingness, in casual, chatty (but occasionally rhyming) free verse, to let it all hang out, to talk about the messes he’s gotten into, especially with the women he’s gone to bed with—women who have absurd foibles and hang-ups.

“Cloclo,” from *Ooga-Booga* (2006), for example, is an elegy of sorts for “The golden person curled up on my doormat, / Using her mink coat as a blanket” who had lost the key to the apartment and was found by the poet “Luxuriously asleep in front of the front door like a dog.” What fun for the man who finds her there! Seidel proceeds to recall her life of artsy vacuousness, the poem ending with the phone call from Florence, informing him

that she has died quietly a minute ago,
Like a tear falling in a field of snow,
Climbing up the ladder to the bells out of
Alzheimer’s total whiteout,
Heavenly Clotilde Peploe called by us all
Cloclo.

How cleverly condescending can one get? A tear falling in a field of snow! Poor old Cloclo: she never had a chance, at least not in Seidel’s poem. And this poet is also given to writing political poems like “The Bush Administration,” which relates the poet’s own suicidal thoughts (“so sui-Seidel”) to the events leading up to 9/11 (“The United States of America preemptively eats the world”), responding to the radio news of an American being beheaded in the Congo with the words “The downpour drumming on

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my taxi gets the Hutu in me dancing,” and soon he is imagining himself “on all fours eating grass / So I can throw up because I like the feeling. / I crouch over a carcass and practice my eating.” Is this a daring revelation of one’s inner demons? I suppose so, but when we note that the poet who has these fleeting thoughts is comfortably *inside* his taxi, most often on the Upper East Side where he lives so well, the admission seems merely tasteless. If you like the tell-all nastiness encountered here, you may well chuckle along with these images of Seidel’s frayed nerve ends. To me, these oh-so-witty and painful psychodramas feel like a throwback to the worst of John Berryman and Robert Lowell in the 1950s. In 2010, who needs it?

Engaged Literature

John D. Pizer

Louisiana State University

Two of the leading theorists of the second half of the twentieth century, Roland Barthes and Hans-Georg Gadamer, give us models of reception theory, that, when considered in tandem, provide one avenue for defining a bad work of imaginative literature. Barthes proposed the idea that there are two kinds of literary works, readerly and writerly. Readerly works do the work of the reader, guiding him or her in one clear path that allows no interpretive deviation, providing all the information, dotting all the i’s and crossing all the t’s, while a writerly work forces the reader to actively engage with the text, only suggesting models—multiple models—of exegesis. Gadamer focused on the hermeneutics of reception, how a genuine work of literature forces the reader to reach across the ages, across cultural and linguistic barriers, to meet the author half way.

Worthwhile literary works force the reader’s active participation and inspire him or her to engage in the hard work of hermeneutic dialogue. Bad books do not do this. Of course, a bad book written in a past age and/or anchored in an unfamiliar linguistic or cultural milieu might force a contemporary reader to do the sort of bridgework called for by Gadamer, but once that bridge is crossed, one finds exactly what one expected. Bad books are not inevitably polemical, and good books can be polemical. Otherwise, all imaginative texts categorized as “engaged literature” would have to be categorized as bad books. However, even good engaged literature will force you to question your presuppositions and make you do some mental writing, will prompt you to engage in hermeneutic dialogue, will challenge you to exercise your brain! Bad books issue no such challenge. Their authors know their readers have preconceived ideas, stereotypes about people and paradigms, and employ them to satisfy their readers’ expectations. Formulaic detective fiction and pornography are examples. Bad books do not challenge readers to think, while good books do.

Partial Badness

James Phelan

The Ohio State University

It’s good that *ABR* wants to promote the discussion of the bad—another sign that it’s once again safe to talk about better and worse when we talk about literature. There will, I’m sure, be no consensus about what constitutes badness or whether it belongs to the book, the reader, the situation of reading, all of the above, or none of the above. But that’s okay. Even bad ideas about badness can at this stage help advance the discussion. (Even if what I say here is

bad, it’s good.)

Books are not just objects but also rhetorical actions in which authors try to do things to their readers. Consequently, books can own their own badness. And they can be bad in three ways: 1) the things they try to do—their goals—can be bad; 2) their goals can be good but their efforts to achieve those goals can be bad; 3) both their goals and their efforts to achieve them can be bad. Good things authors try to do include giving us new ideas and new ways of thinking, engaging and sharpening our ethical values, offering us enriching aesthetic experiences. But sometimes the new way of thinking turns out to be incoherent, the ethical values we engage with are abhorrent, and/or the vision of aesthetic bliss is riddled with clichés. Sometimes the goals can be good, but the gap between those goals and the ability to achieve them—at the level of style, characterization, plotting, etc.—is as wide as the Pacific Ocean. Other times the goals can be deficient and the efforts to achieve them embarrassingly weak. In these cases, the only interesting question about this third phenomenon is whether the double deficiency multiplies or mitigates the badness.

I submit that the most interesting badness in books is partial badness. It’s easy to dismiss the thoroughly bad, but the mixture of the bad and the good is compelling. If Mark Twain had nailed the ending to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), would the novel be so widely discussed? If Twain had written a less brilliant first two-thirds of his novel, would his ending have as many defenders as it does? If that first two-thirds were not so brilliant, would the ending be as bad as it is? No, no, and no.

Of course it’s bad to ask such tendentious questions and answer them with unsupported blanket assertions. But providing the support would be worse, since it would entail an ethical—and aesthetic—breach of the conventions of this forum. So, I end my rhetorical action with a reminder that even if it’s bad, it’s good.

Zombie Mayhem

Liedeke Plate

Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen

With time as perhaps our scarcest good, isn’t a bad book one we might define as “not worthwhile,” that is, as too unimportant, uninteresting, or unrewarding to justify spending time, money, or effort on it? Arthur Schopenhauer once quipped, “One can never read too little of bad, or too much of good books.” Therefore, he maintains in his essay “On Reading and Books,” “In order to read what is good one must make it a condition never to read what is bad; for life is short, and both time and strength limited.”

Following this precept—time management and all that—I am the lucky reader of very few “bad books.” This is cause for self-congratulation: my time’s well spent! But I am haunted by the question: what if those books I have deemed unworthy of my time aren’t really bad? Should I not give them a try—and start reading *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Zombie Jim* (2009), and other classics mixed with zombie mayhem?

The Temptation of Saint Anthony

Martin Riker

Dalkey Archive Press

One mark of a great writer must be the willingness to write a bad book. It makes sense that writers

who push themselves and their projects to the limits of the feasible would occasionally overstep in one direction or another. In this category, I think the greatest bad books must belong to Gustave Flaubert, a writer so wary of writing the same novel twice that instead he took each book as an opportunity to reinvent the entire genre. *Madame Bovary* (1857) is, obviously, a great book, and *Three Tales* (1877) and *Sentimental Education* (1869). *Bouvard and Pecuchet* (1881) is to my mind the greatest of them all—but not all of them are great. *Salamambo* (1862) is not great, although the idea of it is great. But *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874)—that’s my pick for a bad book. His friends told him to hide it away, not to publish it, and while it’s tempting to romanticize any negative reception of a great artist, in this case I think they were right. It just isn’t a good book.



The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Kyle Schlesinger

University of Houston-Victoria

No true Western philosopher could forget the stunning conclusion of Sergio Leone’s masterpiece: the bad dies, the ugly survives, and the good rides off into the sunset weighted down with gold. Books have met other fates. You can’t judge a book by its cover; vigilant readers know that the back, spine, margins, typography, paratexts, paper, binding, printing, illustrations, and yes, sometimes even the content, should be taken into account.

When I was in Portland recently, I had the pleasure of visiting David Abel’s exceptionally well-curated Passages Bookshop. I bought a copy of poet Brian Patten and painter Pip Benveniste’s *When You Wake Tomorrow* (1971) published by Turret Books. The edition is limited to 125 numbered and boxed copies signed by the poet and artist. My typographic hero Asa Benveniste printed this sumptuous, oversized portfolio. The poems aren’t exactly my speed (“I met her early in the evening / the cars were going home / I was twenty four and dreaming”), but there’s much to be learned from Asa’s impeccable design, and Pip’s images hold their own. Although content always comes first in my appreciation of a book, I do pick up things from time to time because I value them as works of art (or craft, if you prefer).

Philip Whalen’s *Highgrade* (1966), a book that isn’t particularly rare, but much cherished by its readers, was also a fortunate find at Passages. In the

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preface, Whalen states, “I write everything with a fountain pen that must be coaxed and warmed before it will work properly. The following pages were written more for the pen’s benefit and instrumentation than they were for mine or for that of the public.” In this oversized facsimile edition published by Coyote Books, I observe Whalen’s poems and doodles as direct expressions of his thought in a verbal/visual continuum. Witty half-truths and playful elegance characterize this work. Although the book is lovely (rusty staples and all), it is its transparency that I value most.

At Powell’s Books, I found *So Long* (1993) by my favorite contemporary fiction writer, Lucia Berlin, and tore through it over a couple shots of espresso one rainy morning. Books published by Black Sparrow Books are fairly formulaic, especially in their later years, and those designed by Graham Mackintosh (this one wasn’t) are brilliant, though unassuming. Aside from the grotesque cover designed by Barbara Martin and the clunky use of ornaments by a typesetter named “Words Worth” (!), I was so infatuated with her subdued stories that the physical fact of the language I was holding became immaterial. I wonder if Berlin was thinking of one of the characters in Leone’s film when she wrote the last couple of lines of her short story (included in this collection) entitled “Good and Bad”: “There was nobody to speak to. To say I was sorry.” As to which is which, invariably, only the reader can decide (or prefer not to).

The Uniqueness of Badness

Davis Schneiderman

Lake Forest College

Good books are all alike; every bad book is bad in its own way. Take *The Secret* (2006) by Rhonda Byrne. That’s a very bad book, even though it has made me filthy rich by unlocking the great chain of being within my ribcage.

Good books make us smile or think or scream or cry or wheeze *ad infinitum*. Yes, we are thrilled. We rave about the precious little tomes to friends and colleagues and neighbors and parents and online rating services.

These books wrap us in each other.

Other bad books sit on our shelves and never get read—despite the signatures of our many writer friends—or they migrate to the underside of the couch, substituting for the missing leg. Our butts, to read, should be level.

Or maybe the books we never read are in fact the good books; they can’t then reaffirm the way we live the way we think the way we love the way we forgot the way everything happens to us rather than us happening to anything. Books we read happen to us. Take George Orwell’s minor work *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), a book about books and bookstores, where the protagonist, Gordon Comstock, puts his ear to the pregnant belly of his new wife—on the final page—and hears the rush of his own blood in his ears.

Oh shit, more of me in the world.

Put another way, there are maybe as many bad books as there are books—hanging onto their hard copy bodies the way a fish might bring its aquarium onto dry land for commerce with the mammals. Taking up space, killing trees, requiring vast resources to print and ship and sell and store and rot and pulp.

Don’t get too excited about e-books either: think of the carbon footprint of the technological-microprocessing complex.

Maybe good books need to run green—all in our heads.

The Witches’ Hammer

James J. Sosnoski

University of Illinois at Chicago

I have disliked numerous books liked by other readers—at the least, their publishers. Reluctant to construe “what constitutes a bad book” as an invitation to discuss those that fall below my expectations, I was perplexed.

The question suggests that “badness” can be an intrinsic quality of a book. But, unlike fruit which can go bad, or bad luck, or computers that won’t boot up, books cannot rot, gamble, or fail to start. Granting that a manual that fails to describe how to use a computer might be judged bad, it is difficult to adjudicate the matter—most customers who look for bargains at Best Buy would find incomprehensible manuals techies enjoy.

The intrinsic badness of books is a baffling idea. Imagine a book without words. You open it up and the pages are blank. Is this a bad book or a good diary? Imagine a book filled with sentences such as “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.” Would this be a bad book or a good joke about Noam Chomsky?

In the face of such conundrums, I construed a “bad” book as a harmful one. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Witches’ Hammer*) (1487) by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger came immediately to mind.

For those who do not have *Malleus Maleficarum* in their libraries, here is a review of it:

For nearly three centuries *Malleus Maleficarum* was the professional manual for witch hunters...by two of the most famous Inquisitors. Under the Bull of Pope Innocent VIII, [they wrote a treatise in 1484 on]...how and why women roast their first-born male child...how witches deprive men of their vital member...when to use the trial by the red hot iron...and many other [topics].

The Novel That Doesn’t Know

Robyn Warhol-Down

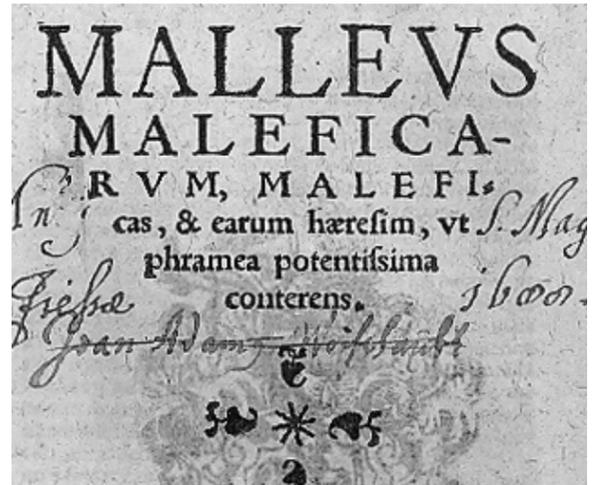
The Ohio State University

As a narrative theorist, I can find something interesting in any piece of prose fiction, and as a feminist, I am wary of pronouncing books “good” or “bad.” I always ask, who’s it good for—whose interests does it serve? However, I acknowledge one kind of truly bad book: the Novel that Doesn’t Know (NDK). The NDK is a work of realistic fiction that makes foolish mistakes in its representation of the material world.

Novels set on college campuses, for example, are almost universally ignorant of the tenure process. Candidates for promotion are forever getting or losing it because of some personal remark they made to somebody. The NDK has no idea how people actually progress toward tenure—presumably it’s too arcane to matter. Sometimes academic novels don’t know information that’s much less obscure. The protagonist of *Chasing Shakespeares* (2003), a twenty-first-century Harvard graduate student in English, got his BA at the University of Vermont, where he played football. That’s just dumb: UVM hasn’t had a football team since the 1970s. How hard would it have been to check?

The NDKs that irritate me the most, though, are novels whose protagonists’ tribulations can be attributed to their active alcoholism, but the novel has no idea. As I remember *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (1996), one of the protagonists has some

drinks, then has a fight with her boyfriend, then has a few more, then argues with her mother. The novel asks you to take the substance of the fights seriously. My reaction: “Get sober and then tell me about it!” Shades of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), another book dangerously verging on being an NDK.

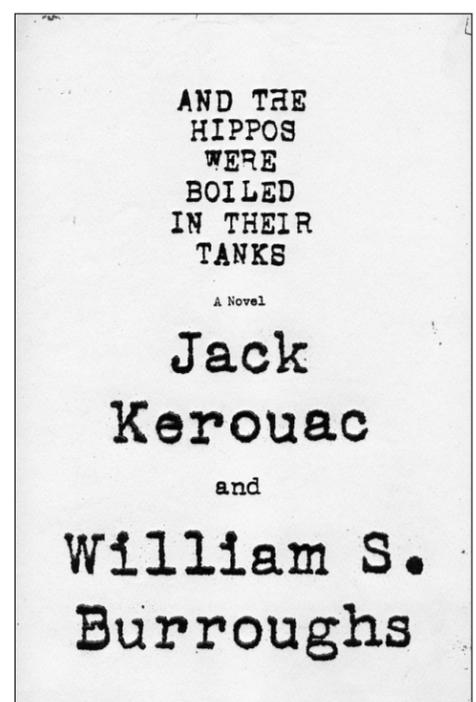


Posthumous Juvenilia

Regina Weinreich

School of Visual Arts

And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks, a 1945 collaborative effort by the young Jack Kerouac and his friend, the somewhat older William S. Burroughs, to render a fiction of the true-life story of the murder of Dave Kammerer by the boy he was stalking, Lucien Carr, is considered a bad book: 1) it was not published until last year, and so, not having found a publisher early on, when it was first sent out, it must be bad; and 2) it is thought to be a lesser work for these iconic writers, and why publish a bad book by otherwise good writers, especially posthumously and after much lauded careers. Alternating chapters in the hardboiled detective genre, the two authors reveal an interesting moment in early Beat history and the beginnings of their own crafts. Is it ever good to publish a serious writer’s post-juvenilia? Perhaps challenged by this material, Kerouac went on to write a new version in the realistic style he was developing even before *The Town and the City* (1950), his first published novel. That version, a gem called *Wish I Were You*, remains in fragment, and is the finest example of Kerouac’s pre-spontaneous bop prosody. As to *Hippos*, well, the book provides a glimpse into the lives of young people in postwar New York City, and even if Kerouac/Burroughs’s best writing is not fully displayed, still fascinates. In fact, if not exactly good, it’s not half bad either.



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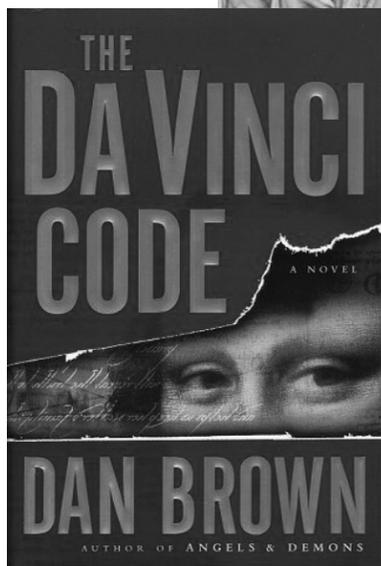
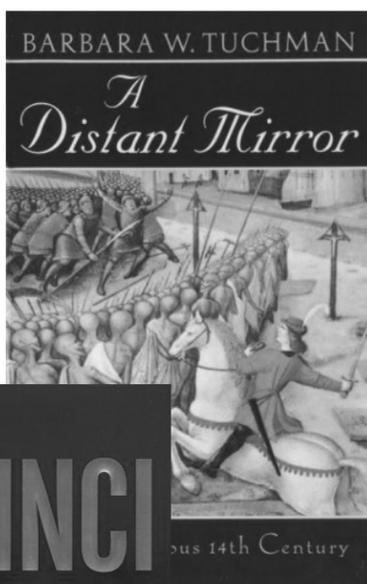
Medieval Marketing

Bonnie Wheeler

Southern Methodist University

Years ago, I singled out Barbara Tuchman's 1978 *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* as a really bad book. This study of the Middle Ages as a distant mirror of our own times is weird and warped and entirely without sympathy for its subject. At first, I thought its wild popularity had touched a nerve with the reading public. Then I found out how its publisher flooded the preview/review market with so many free copies that the book was bound to get lots of coverage in those pre-web days. It wasn't just that the book was bad; it was that its "new marketing strategy" was corrosive. So much for the "free market."

But is anything as bad as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003)? This formulaic knock-off of fascistic conspiracy theories is a trite study for a film script—and no wonder the movie was also bad. I love the chapters that are only a couple of lines long. Again, it is a book whose publishers flooded the preview/review market with thousands of free copies. Yet for many of my students, it is the book that brought them into the English major. For others, it is the only book they've ever enjoyed reading. IS it possible that even a Bad Book can *do Good*?



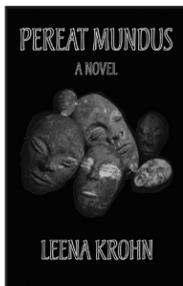
To Rescue Bad Books

Zahi Zalloua

Whitman College

Bad books deliver on their promise. They lend themselves too easily to pedagogical use; they are saturated with purpose, conforming all too well to their readers' expectations. They don't take a risk; they don't interrupt the numbing flow of knowledge and commentary. They are devoured (read once) and then discarded by an insatiable reading public. Is the state of bad books hopeless? Can they be "rescued"? Can they be reminded of their so-called literariness? Maybe. Maybe a bad book is in fact merely a mirror that reflects a bad reader—a reader who asks uncreative questions of a work. Or maybe bad books are really at their worst when they're paired with such bad readers.

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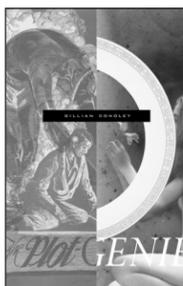


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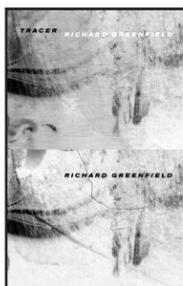
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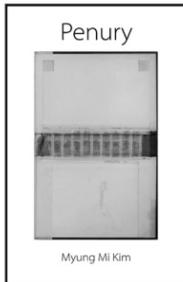


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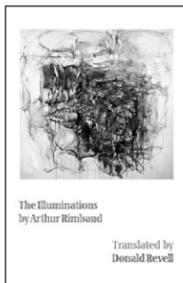


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